

Commissioner's Weekly Field Memo
Friday, January 16, 2015

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Notes from Commissioner Gist

1. RIDE, RISSA leadership develop message points on PARCC assessments and parental refusal

I have been meeting with the leadership team of the Rhode Island School Superintendents' Association to develop key message points regarding families and students who have concerns about our state assessments. We have developed these four key message points to guide you in your communications with families and with your community:

We expect all students to participate in state assessments, which are part of the process of education in Rhode Island public schools.

There is no formal procedure for parents to remove their children from participation in any school activities, including state assessments.

We encourage school leaders to meet personally with parents who express a concern about state assessments in order to communicate benefits, to correct misinformation, and to encourage participation.

Students attending school during days of administration of state assessments, including make-up days, will participate in the assessment process.

I encourage you to share these message points with your leadership team and with others in your school community.

Some of you have contacted RIDE with specific questions about PARCC assessments. We are responding personally to each inquiry, but I want to share with you our responses to some of the questions:

Can we require students to participate in PARCC assessments?

Yes. School districts can have policies requiring participation. For example, school districts or schools can decide to use PARCC participation as one part of determining a student's grade in a course. At least for this school year, school districts and schools cannot use PARCC scores or achievement levels as components in determining a student's grade because these results will not be available during the current school year.

Can schools or school districts use PARCC as a graduation requirement?

No. Schools and school districts cannot use PARCC participation or PARCC results as a graduation requirement until the Class of 2017.

Must PARCC results appear on a student's high-school transcript?

Yes. State-assessment results will appear on high-school transcripts. We will not have scores or achievement levels available during the current school year, so the earliest

PARCC results on transcripts will be for the Class of 2016.

What happens to students who do not participate in PARCC assessments? Will they receive a score of "0"?

We are developing guidance on this matter, and we will send the guidance to LEAs next week.

Will nonparticipating students have any effect on school classifications?

As federal law sets forth, schools must attain a participation rate of 95 percent or better. We are developing guidance as to how we will determine participation rates and whether participation rates will affect school classifications during the first year of PARCC assessments.

What happens if proficiency rates go down because of PARCC?

PARCC is a new assessment this year, and we recognize that there may be a statewide decline in proficiency rates. We will not measure PARCC results against the results of our previous state assessments. The proficiency rates your child or your school achieves on PARCC will set a new baseline or starting point. Going forward, we can use these baselines to see whether our state as a whole, our schools, and our students are making progress.

Will PARCC affect my child's grades?

This year, we will not have PARCC results during the current school year, so PARCC results will not affect your child's

grade in this school year. The scores and achievement levels students attain on PARCC assessments this year will set a baseline or starting point that we will use to measure progress going forward. In future years, schools and school districts may decide, if they so desire, to use PARCC results as a component in determining students' grades.

Will PARCC results affect teacher evaluations?

Yes, but the results for this school year will set a baseline. We base evaluations on growth and improvement, so PARCC assessments will not affect effect evaluations until we have three years of results – enough to measure improvement over time.

As noted above, we are developing guidance on how we will determine participation rates during the first year of PARCC assessments, and I will share this guidance with you. I will keep you informed about any developments on this matter, and I will stay in contact with the association leadership regarding messaging and further responses to inquiries.

2. Taskforce on teacher absenteeism to convene

As I noted to you two weeks ago in the January 2 Field Memo, the U.S. Department of Education issued a series of state-level [reports](#) on educator equity based on data from the Office of Civil Rights with data that included teacher absenteeism. Based on data from the 2011-12 school year that the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights collects directly from school districts, 40.6 percent of Rhode Island teachers are absent for more than 10 days during the school year. By way of comparison, the percent of teachers absent for more than 10 days in Massachusetts was 25

percent; in Connecticut, 29.9 percent. (This absenteeism rate does not include days approved for professional development or other school activities off campus, such as field trips.) The absentee rates are higher in the highest-poverty and highest-minority population schools – greater than 50 percent – but the absentee rates are far too high across the board. [GoLocalProv](#) and [Politico](#) reported on teacher absenteeism, and the Providence Journal is working on a story on this issue.

I have met with the leadership of the Rhode Island School Superintendents' Association (RISSA) to discuss the issues related to this phenomenon, including the need for data at the state level and a review of language in district collective bargaining agreements regarding absenteeism. I have also been in touch with the National Education Association – Rhode Island, the Rhode Island Association of School Principals, and the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals. We have decided to quickly convene a taskforce to work on action items regarding teacher absenteeism. Deputy Commissioner David Abbott will chair the group, and Kathy Sipala will represent RISSA. Clearly, all of us recognize that absences from work are necessary at times for health reasons or for family emergencies. We also recognize the responsibility we share for providing excellent daily instruction in our schools. Absenteeism disrupts the education process in the absent teachers' classrooms, and absenteeism also affects the schedules of teachers who may be called upon to cover for their absent colleagues. Any steps we can take to reduce teacher absenteeism will be in the best interest of teachers and students. I will keep you informed about the work of this taskforce.

3. Rhode Island to be host to regional technology summit April 21 and 22

You may recall that, as I noted in a Field Memo in October, Richard Culatta, Director of the Office of Educational Technology, and Seth Andrew, Senior Advisor and Superintendent in Residence, at the U.S. Department of Education sent a letter to all superintendents, encouraging you to sign the Future Ready District Pledge. This pledge to pursue opportunities for digital learning is in line with our commitment to bringing blended learning – the combination of digital learning under the guidance of an educator and traditional face-to-face instruction – to every school in Rhode Island. I encourage you to read the [letter](#) and to read and consider signing the [pledge](#). I am pleased that the response, in Rhode Island and nationwide, has been very positive.

Last November, the U.S. Department of Education announced that, as part of the “[Future Ready](#)” initiative, there will be 12 Regional Summits this year on using technology and digital learning. I am pleased to let you know that Rhode Island will be the host state for Northeast Regional Summit, which will take place at West Warwick High School (1 Webster Knight Dr.) on April 21 and 22. All who signed the Future Ready pledge may attend the conference free of charge. Registration information is [here](#).

The U.S. Department of Education notes:

The summits offer school district leaders expert support to create a digital learning plan that aligns with instructional best practices, is implemented by highly trained teachers, and leads to personalized learning experiences for all students, particularly those from traditionally under-served communities.

“Future Ready highlights the critical role of district leaders in setting a vision and creating the environment where educators and students access the tools, content, and expertise necessary to thrive in a connected world,” said [Richard Culatta](#), director of the Department’s Office of Educational Technology.

“School districts across the country are helping teachers harness the power of technology to create personal learning environments for all students,” said U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. “We want to make sure every child – whether he or she is in the inner city, in a rural community, or on a Native American reservation – has access to knowledge and the chance to learn 24 hours a day, seven days a week.”

The Future Ready Regional Summits are an important step to realizing the goals of the [ConnectED Initiative](#) announced by President Obama in 2013 to connect 99 percent of students to high-speed Internet and empower teachers with the technology they need to transform teaching and learning. The Regional Summits are expected to engage more than 1,300 district leaders nationwide. For more information on the regional summits please visit www.FutureReadySchools.org.

Thanks to your ongoing efforts to “connect” our schools to the future, Rhode Island continues to receive recognition as a leading state for innovation powered by technology.

Here is a list of other upcoming state and national events that will support you in developing your digital-learning implementation strategies:

EdTechTeam RI Google Summit - February 28 - March 1
Coventry High School

<http://ri.gafesummit.com/>

Highlander Institute Blended Learning Conference - March 7
URI Feinstein Campus, Providence

Keynote: Tom Vander Ark

<http://www.blendedlearningconference.com/>

Digital Learning Day - March 13

More info to follow on local events.

<http://digitallearningday.org>

LFA RI Conference – The Whole Child - March 14

Johnston High School

<http://www.lfari.org/2015-conference>

Digital Literacy Summer Institute - **July 25 - 31**

URI Feinstein Campus, Providence

<http://mediaeducationlab.com>

4. RIDE to release 2014 graduation rates next week

You have in hand your information on your own 2014 graduation and dropout rates. We have been compiling a statewide report, which I will share with Governor Raimondo and her team. Next week, probably on Tuesday, we plan to release the report on 2014 graduation rates (4-year and 5-year rates) and dropout rates,

including statewide, district-level, and school-level data, as well as statewide breakdowns for various student groups.

5. Cumberland, Lincoln students selected for Senate Youth Program, scholarship

Senators Reed and Whitehouse have announced that the two students who will represent Rhode Island as delegates to the 53rd annual United States Senate Youth Program are Chase Boni, of Cumberland High School, and Ben Chiacchia, of Lincoln Senior High School. Chase and Ben will be among the 104 student delegates who travel to Washington in March for an intensive, weeklong “study of the federal government and the people who lead it.” The week’s activities, according to the Program, include “meetings and briefings with Senators, House Representatives and Congressional staff, the President, a Justice of the Supreme Court, leaders of cabinet agencies, an Ambassador to the United States and senior members of the national media.” Additionally, each delegate will receive a \$5,000 scholarship from The Hearst Foundations.

Chase is captain of the debate team and president of the linguistics club at Cumberland High, and he is the president of the Future Business Leaders of Rhode Island. Ben is vice-president of the Class of 2016 at Lincoln High, as well as captain of the swim and a contributor to the school newspaper.

Caroline Coaty, of Rogers High School, in Newport, and Matthew Lamontagne, of Barrington High School, have been selected as alternate delegates.

The selection process for each of these great students involved a test on civics and government, an essay, and a personal interview.

Congratulations to our Senate Youth Program delegates! I encourage all high schools in Rhode Island to participate in this valuable program next year. If you don't participate already, now would be a good time to select a program coordinator for the next selection process, and be on the lookout for program information in August or early September.

6. 8 Rhode Island middle schools to participate in joint project with NASA, U.S. Department of Education

Rhode Island has been selected as one of ten states to participate in a collaborative effort between the National Aeronautics and Astronautics Administration (NASA) and the U.S. Department of Education 21st Century Community Learning Center initiative. Middle-school students will work in teams to develop solutions to authentic challenges that NASA scientists and engineers face. The students will work with a learning-center instructor after school, and they will have regular video-conference connections with subject-matter experts at NASA. At the end of the process, the students will create videos presenting their solutions to the challenge. The Rhode Island STEM Center and the Rhode Island After School Plus Alliance are providing technical assistance and support to the project locally. The schools that will participate are:

- Calcutt Middle School (Central Falls)
- Hugh B. Bain Middle School (Cranston)
- Highlander Charter School
- Samuel Slater Junior High School (Pawtucket)
- Esek Hopkins Middle School and Nathan Bishop Middle School (Providence)
- John F. Deering Middle School (West Warwick)
- Woonsocket Middle School

Congratulations to the teachers and students in these middle schools, and I am grateful to our partners at the Rhode Island STEM center and in our afterschool programs for their support of this initiative.

From RIDE

Early Learning:

7. Preschool programs from 8 school districts join BrightStars quality rating, improvement system

Congratulations to the public-school preschool programs that have joined BrightStars! A total of 14 public preschool programs in Rhode Island joined BrightStars in 2014. Under our Rhode Island Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge grant, we have the goal of having 100 percent of our early learning programs, including those in public schools, enroll in BrightStars. The 2014 public-school enrollees and their school districts are:

- Central Falls: Captain Hunt Early Learning
- Coventry: Blackrock Elementary School, Hopkins Hill Elementary School, Washington Oak Elementary School
- Exeter-West Greenwich Regional: Lineham Early Learning Center
- Newport: Pell Elementary School
- North Kingstown: Fishing Cove Elementary School
- Providence: Anthony Carnevale Elementary School, Asa Messer Elementary School, Charles N. Fortes Elementary School, Pleasant View Elementary School
- South Kingstown: South Kingstown Inclusionary Preschool

- Westerly: Bradford Elementary School, Westerly Public Schools

BrightStars is the Rhode Island' Quality Rating and Improvement System, designed to rate the quality level of early-care and education programs, to identify areas for improvement, to and connect programs to resources so as to support continuous quality improvement. All early-childhood programs in public schools are eligible to join BrightStars.

Through our Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge grant, Rhode Island offers public schools with a BrightStars rating the opportunity to receive up to \$60,000 annually in quality-improvement grants. These grants are intended to advance providers along the quality continuum by increasing or maintaining their BrightStars rating, helping staff members meet the Rhode Island Workforce Knowledge and Competencies, and advancing teaching practices.

Additionally, early-learning facility capital grants ranging from \$10,000 to \$50,000 are available to BrightStars-rated programs facing urgent facility issues. Priorities for these funds include facility issues that are compromising the DCYF licensing status of a program (for community-based programs), major health and safety concerns, and issues that are preventing a program from moving up the quality ladder.

For more information about BrightStars, grant opportunities, and the Rhode Island early-childhood commitment, visit exceed.ri.gov.

8. RIDE schedules webinars on applying for funds under Prekindergarten Expansion Grant

RIDE is holding an informational webinar for people interested in applying for the Rhode Island Prekindergarten Program. For the coming school year (2015-16), RIDE expects to fund an *additional* 17 classrooms in the following communities: Central Falls, East Providence, Pawtucket, Providence, Newport, West Warwick, and Woonsocket. The webinar will be offered twice, once on Friday, January 23, from noon to 1 p.m., and again on Monday, January 26, from 3:30 to 4:30 p.m. We will present information on the Rhode Island Prekindergarten Program, expectations of those who receive funds under our Prekindergarten Expansion Grant, and the RFP process and timeline. The webinar will also provide an opportunity for participants to ask questions. Responses to questions will be provided during the webinar or posted at a later date on the RIDE Early Childhood Education web page.

To join us for one of the webinars, please register using the appropriate link below. After registering, you will receive a confirmation email containing information about joining the webinar. [View System Requirements](#)

To register for the January 23 webinar:

Pre-K Expansion Grant and Upcoming RFP Competition

<https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/3259483892639027970>

To register for the January 26 webinar:

Pre-K Expansion Grant and Upcoming RFP Competition

<https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/472215319200538882>

Please contact Kristen Greene at kristen.greene@ride.ri.gov if you have any questions about the Rhode Island Prekindergarten Program.

Legal:

9. RIDE issues decision on dispute regarding homeless status

Although without a permanent residence for more than two years, family is deemed homeless under the law and may remain enrolled in school district of original residence:

http://www2.ride.ri.gov/applications/RideDirectory/DOCS/2015/001-15_Exeter-W.Greenwich_RSD_v.T.A._parent_L.Doe_010815.docx.pdf

Data Collection:

10. RIDE collecting data on virtual learning, data due Wednesday (January 21) – *Action Item*

RIDE is preparing the annual report required by the [RI Statewide Virtual Education Act](#). As part of our efforts to improve access to high-quality blended and online learning, we have been collecting information from LEAs about virtual-learning education opportunities. The required reporting elements include information about virtual-course participation rates and expenditures related to virtual education. We collect this information from LEAs through the Teacher Course Student (TCS) and Uniform Chart of Accounts (UCOA) data collections.

TCS and UCOA data must be current and up to date by **Wednesday** (January 21) to ensure accurate reporting. [Virtual Learning Reporting Technical Assistance](#) and guidance is available on our website. If you have questions about our data collection on virtual learning, please contact Holly Walsh, at holly.walsh@ride.ri.gov.

11. *Reminder: Student Contact collection due today*
(January 16) – *Action Item*

We collect Student Contact data to survey students with disabilities. We also use the data in order to communicate important information to students and families. You should submit Student Contact data at the beginning of the school year, and you should keep the data up to date throughout the school year, with resubmissions in January and June. Student Contact data can be submitted through eRIDE (www.eride.ri.gov) by using the Enrollment Census application or through the Automated Data Transfer (ADT) agent; for more information regarding this data collection, please refer to the collection [documentation](#). If you have any questions or concerns about Student Contact data,

please contact Greg Martin, at Gregory.martin@ride.ri.gov or 222-8495.

Assessments:

12. RIDE posts timeline, guides for PARCC technology preparation

We have posted on our website a timeline of technology events, along with documentation regarding Student Maintenance, Technology Issue Resolution, and abbreviated set-up guides for proctor caching and session creation on [District Exchange on RideMap, under District Exchange Public/PARCC Technology Toolkit](#). Additionally, we are working on cleaning up any critical warnings that have been generated through the student-registration file. We will resolve the majority of the warnings for LEAs sometime next week. You should expect a list of unresolved warnings near the end of next week. To maintain these resolved critical warnings, please export your student data and maintain these data, based on the Student Maintenance document mentioned above.

We also want to thank you for importing data on your students for the spring assessment block, which begins on March 16. We would like you to be as prepared as possible for the beginning of the spring assessment. LEAs should be working on their student personal-needs profile import, which you can import at any time up to the beginning of the assessment period. When importing files or making any modifications within PearsonAccessNext.com, please be aware of the assessment for which you are modifying the data. You can check the assessment by verifying the assessment period in the top right of the pearsonNext.com screen. LEAs should also be conducting teacher trainings on the

Pearson TestNav tool, and test coordinators should be creating test sessions within the PearsonAccessNext.com site, by **January 31**.

If you have any questions or concerns about PARCC technology preparedness, please contact Greg Martin, at Gregory.martin@ride.ri.gov or 222-8495.

From the U.S. Department of Education

13. Education Secretary Duncan delivers address on reauthorization of Elementary and Secondary Education Act

Please see this message from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Communications and Outreach:

On Monday (January 12), U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan laid out a bold vision for the nation's landmark K-12 education law, the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA), in a speech at Seaton Elementary School in Washington, D.C.

On the 50th anniversary of the introduction of the ESEA bill, the Secretary called for a new law that will work to ensure strong opportunities for all students and protect the most vulnerable among them.

In his speech, he said that as the country moves away from No Child Left Behind—the latest version of ESEA—Congress faces a choice about whether to take a path that moves toward the promise of equity or a path that walks away from it.

The Secretary pointed to the progress our country has made but said it would be a mistake to turn back the clock, warning that “we cannot allow ourselves to believe we are yet doing justice by all of our young people.”

In laying out the path forward, he said that reauthorization must be one that expands opportunity for every child, “strengthens our nation economically, improves resources for schools, and supports and helps to modernize the teaching profession.”

He made clear he believes that schools and teachers need more resources to do their vital work and announced that President Obama will seek an increase of \$2.8 billion in ESEA funding in his 2016 budget request. He called for expanding the opportunity for preschool and modernizing teaching through improved support, preparation, and funding.

He also proposed new steps to reduce the burden of testing on classroom time and to limit unnecessary testing in schools—without sacrificing annual statewide assessments that give educators and parents the information they need to help every child be successful.

While there is much to debate in reauthorizing ESEA, Secretary Duncan noted there are areas for productive compromise and that, traditionally, education has been—and must continue to be—a bipartisan cause.

To learn more, please explore and share these resources about today’s speech:

- Read Secretary Duncan's speech:
<http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/americas-educational-crossroads-making-right-choice-our-children%E2%80%99s-future>
- Watch the video of the speech:
<http://youtu.be/D1flpbLaebQ> See the press release:
<http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-education-secretary-arne-duncan-calls-strong-education-law-protects-all-stude>
- Check out our blog:
<http://www.ed.gov/blog/2015/01/opportunity-is-not-optional-secretary-duncans-vision-for-americas-landmark-education-law/>
- Learn more about ESEA: <http://www.ed.gov/esea>

From other organizations

RIDE will post this field memo on Tuesday, at:

<http://www.ride.ri.gov/InsideRIDE/CommissionerDeborahAGist/FieldMemos.aspx>